

# AROUND ONE CACTUS

Owls, Bats and Leaping Rats

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illustrated by Jennifer DiRubbio

## Genre

**Narrative nonfiction** tells about real things using elements of stories. As you read, think about how the facts have been arranged.



Question of the Week

**What can we observe in  
different environments?**







Dear Two-Legged Adventurer,

Welcome to my hot and rocky home! You may think that this place is lifeless and dull, but it's not. In fact, the more you learn about the desert the more amazing it becomes. I think the desert is a **topic** you can really sink your teeth into. Get it?

The desert is filled with amazing creatures and **incredible** plants. Some of us are friends, some of us aren't. But that's OK, because we have all learned to adapt to our special environment. That means that we can survive and reproduce. It also means that there are many kinds of neighbors who like to live in the same place. Some neighbors may be dangerous, like me. And some, like the bat, may spend the whole night sticking its face into flowers. We're all special.

Many of us live in and around the saguaro cactus—it's really a sharp place to be! Some live high above in **lofty** apartments. Others hide between rocks on the ground. And a few live underground where it's cool.

I hope you enjoy visiting our unique home. We're an unusual band of neighbors—some fly, some slither, some hop and a few even dance in the moonlight. Look around, but be careful where you walk!

Warm regards,

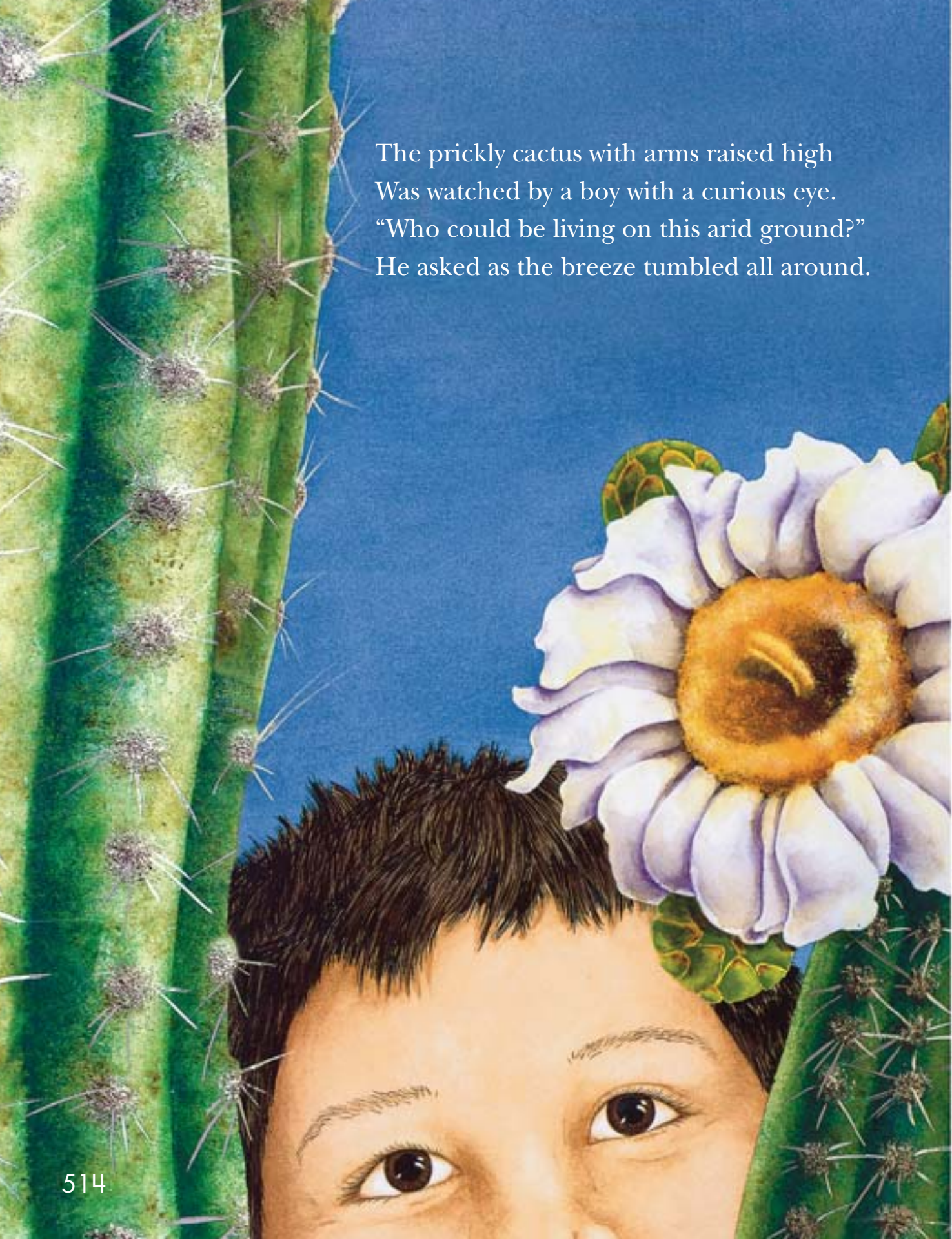
**W. D.**

(Western Diamondback Rattlesnake)


This is the desert, wild and free,  
A place of sun-baked majesty,  
With shifting dunes and rocky edges  
And bushes gripping ancient ledges.  
Here stands a cactus, tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in  
a **waterless** land.

**This is the cactus.**



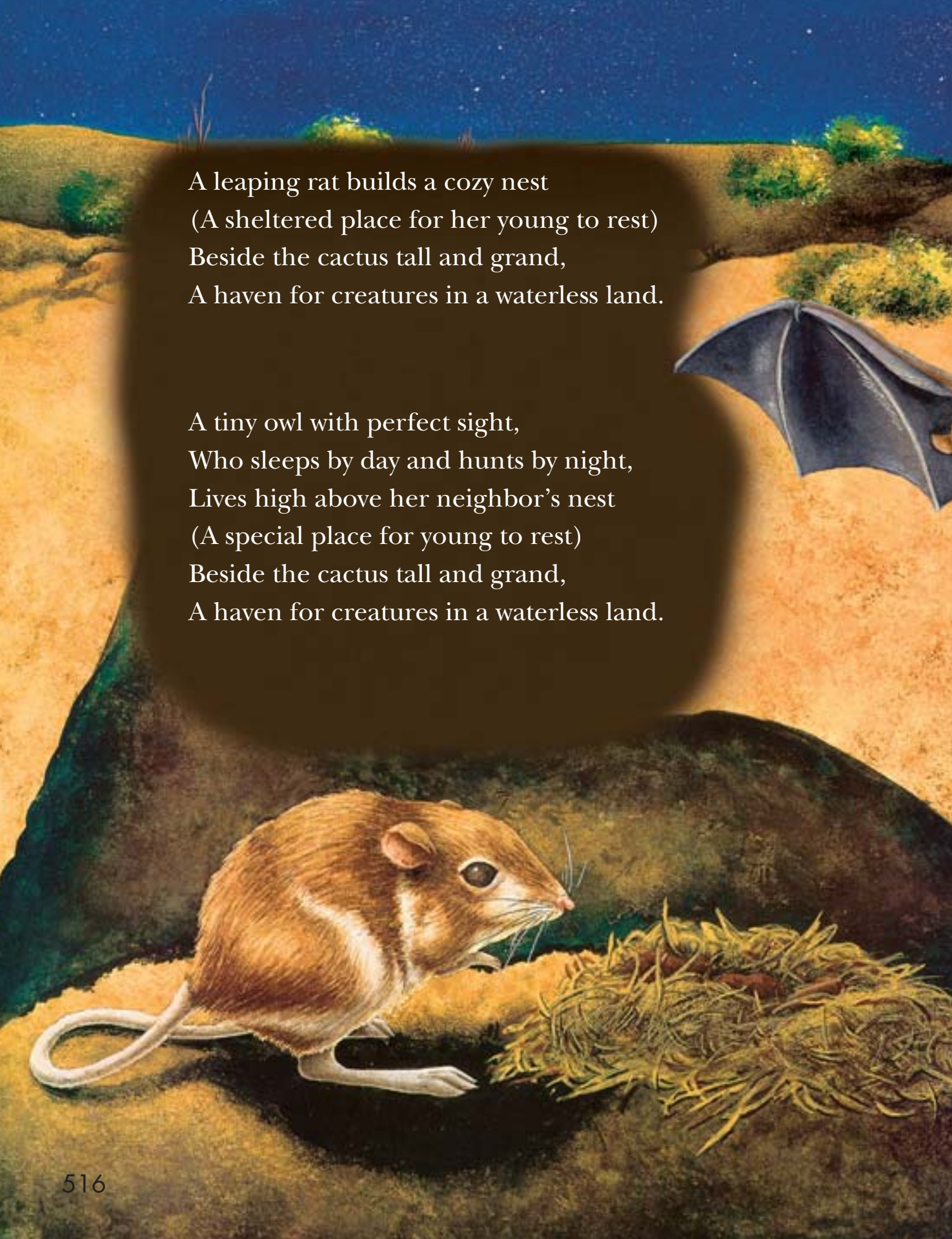
A close-up illustration of a young boy with dark hair and large, curious eyes looking upwards. He is positioned in front of a large green saguaro cactus. A single, large, light purple flower with a bright yellow center is in bloom on the cactus, partially obscuring the boy's face. The background is a clear, bright blue sky.

The prickly cactus with arms raised high  
Was watched by a boy with a curious eye.  
“Who could be living on this arid ground?”  
He asked as the breeze tumbled all around.

A stylized illustration of a desert landscape at sunset. A large, dark silhouette of a saguaro cactus with two arms dominates the foreground. The sky is a vibrant mix of orange, red, and purple, suggesting the setting or rising sun. In the distance, a small silhouette of a bird is visible in the upper right corner, and a small silhouette of a creature is visible near the base of the cactus on the right.


He observed the giant in the fading light,  
But the critters were resting far from sight.  
So he turned and slowly walked away.  
Then the creatures woke to play and prey.





A leaping rat builds a cozy nest  
(A sheltered place for her young to rest)  
Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in a waterless land.

A tiny owl with perfect sight,  
Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
Lives high above her neighbor's nest  
(A special place for young to rest)  
Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in a waterless land.



A long-nose bat flies to this tower  
And spreads the pollen from flower  
to flower,  
Above the owl with perfect sight,  
Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
Who lives above her neighbor's nest  
(A special place for young to rest)  
Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in a waterless land.





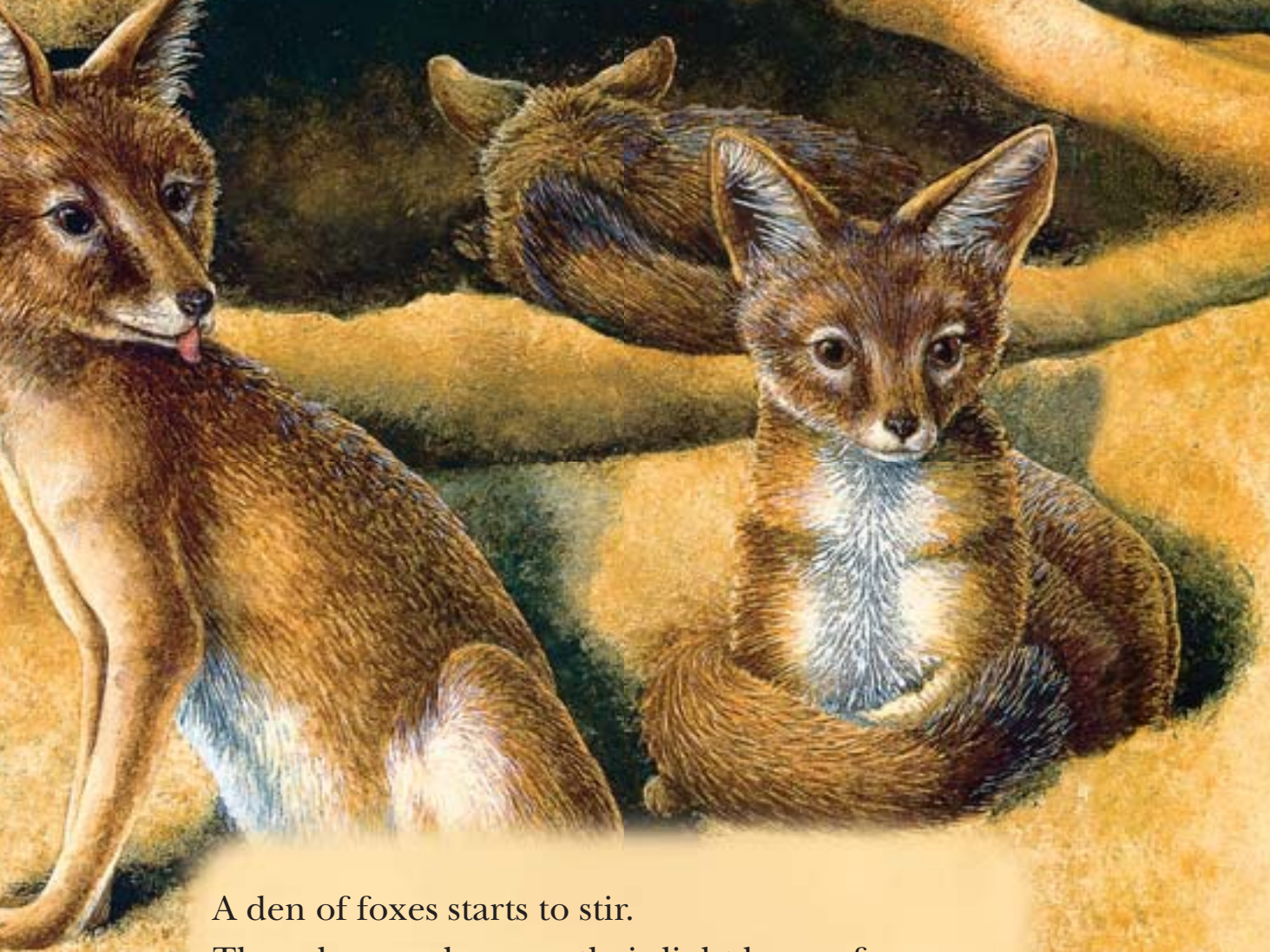
A rattlesnake with deadly teeth  
Slip-slides across the ground beneath  
The long-nose bat upon the tower,  
Who spreads the pollen from flower to flower,  
Above the owl with perfect sight,  
Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
Who lives above her neighbor's nest  
(A special place for young to rest)  
Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in a waterless land.



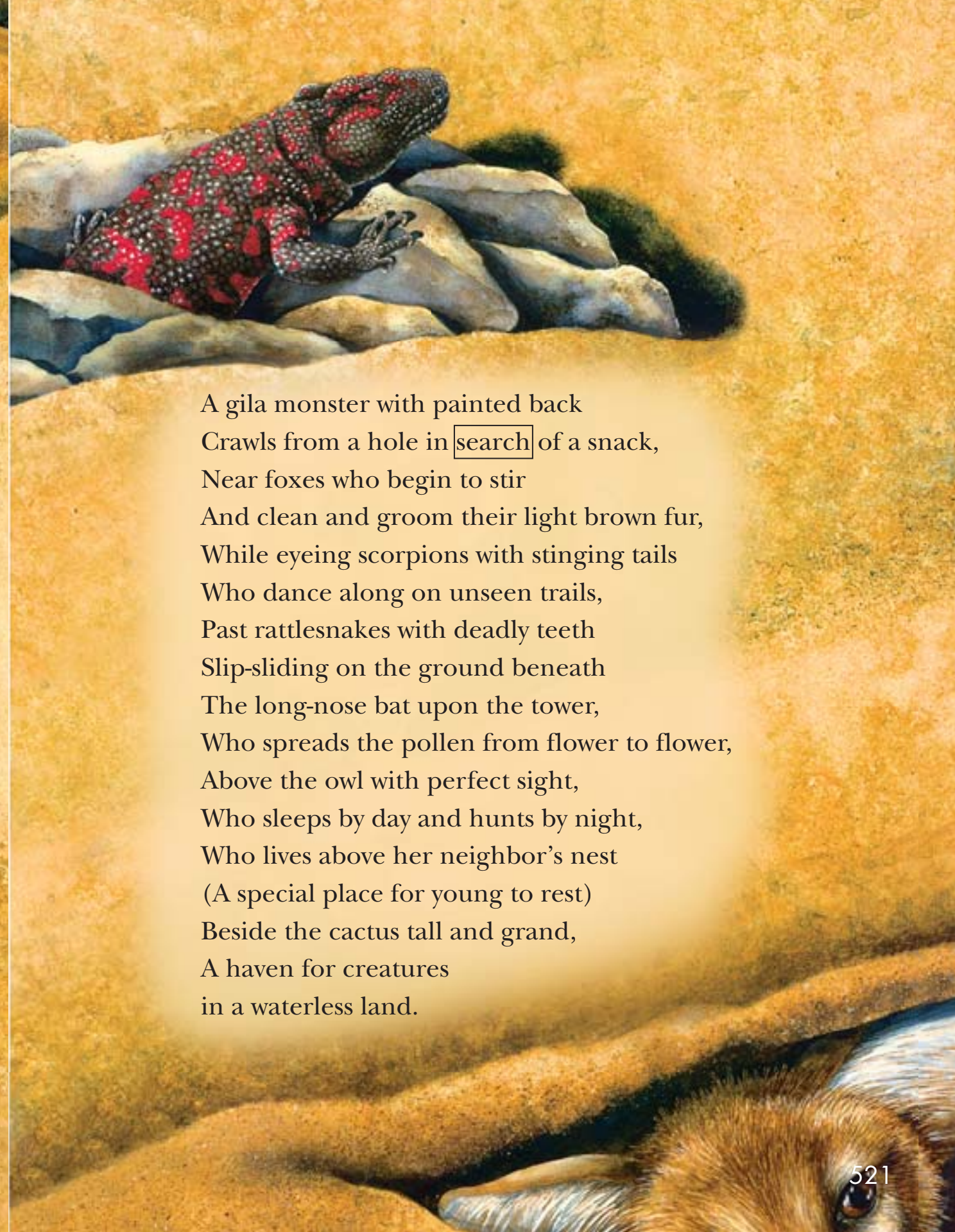
Some scorpions with stinging tails  
Dance along on unseen trails,  
Past rattlesnakes with deadly teeth  
Slip-sliding on the ground beneath  
The long-nose bat upon the tower,  
Who spreads the pollen from flower to flower,  
Above the owl with perfect sight,  
Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
Who lives above her neighbor's nest  
(A special place for young to rest)  
Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
A haven for creatures in a waterless land.








A den of foxes starts to stir.  
 They clean and groom their light brown fur,  
 While eyeing scorpions with stinging tails  
 Who dance along on unseen trails,  
 Past rattlesnakes with deadly teeth  
 Slip-sliding on the ground beneath  
 The long-nose bat upon the tower,  
 Who spreads the pollen from flower to flower,  
 Above the owl with perfect sight,  
 Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
 Who lives above her neighbor's nest  
 (A special place for young to rest)  
 Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
 A haven for creatures in a waterless land.



A gila monster with painted back  
 Crawls from a hole in search of a snack,  
 Near foxes who begin to stir  
 And clean and groom their light brown fur,  
 While eyeing scorpions with stinging tails  
 Who dance along on unseen trails,  
 Past rattlesnakes with deadly teeth  
 Slip-sliding on the ground beneath  
 The long-nose bat upon the tower,  
 Who spreads the pollen from flower to flower,  
 Above the owl with perfect sight,  
 Who sleeps by day and hunts by night,  
 Who lives above her neighbor's nest  
 (A special place for young to rest)  
 Beside the cactus tall and grand,  
 A haven for creatures  
 in a waterless land.





A world of survivors in a sun-baked land  
Are sheltered and harbored by a cactus grand.  
The spiny plant with its weathered face  
Is a noble guard in this busy place.



Field Notes:

All of the animals described in this book are found in the Sonoran desert of the southwestern United States and Mexico. The specific species illustrated are all nocturnal: they sleep during the day and come out in the cool of night to hunt and feed. These creatures can all be found in or around a Saguaro cactus.

Saguaro Cactus

The Saguaro (suh-WAR-oh) Cactus lives in the Sonoran desert. The Saguaro provides food, shelter and moisture for a wide variety of desert animals. It thrives in rocky areas. It requires very little water and can go for two years without rain. Surprisingly, about 75 to 95 percent of the cactus's weight is water.



Fantastic Fact:

Saguaros can grow as tall as 56 feet, weigh as much as an African elephant, and live to be over 200 years old.

Kangaroo Rat

This animal's name comes from the fact that it hops over the ground like a kangaroo. Kangaroo rats reach an overall length of nine to 14 inches (including the tail) and are often pale in color with shades of tan, cream and off-white. Their hind feet are large with hairy soles that aid in jumping in loose, soft sand. They live in underground burrows shaped like the letter U. They primarily eat seeds which they gather from various plants at night. Their life span is less than five years.



Fantastic Fact:

Kangaroo rats are so efficient at converting the dry seeds they eat into water that they need no other water source.



Elf Owl

Elf owls live in the abandoned nests of gila woodpeckers. Their nests are 15 to 35 feet above the ground. Because of the moisture stored in the cactus and the thick lining of the nest, an elf owl stays cool even when the air temperature is over 100 degrees. Elf owls are tiny birds with rounded heads, yellow eyes, a greenish-yellow bill and white eyebrows. They eat insects, spiders, and other small animals such as lizards and centipedes. They can be easily identified by their high-pitched squeaky whistle.



Fantastic Fact:

The elf owl is the world's smallest owl. Adults grow to a length of just five inches and a total weight of one and a half ounces.

Lesser Long-Nose Bat

This creature rests in caves during the day and feeds at night. Its eyes are best for seeing in the dark. It plays a critical role in the life of the saguaro. When the saguaro blossoms in May, the long-nose sips the nectar inside the flowers. As it drinks, pollen sticks to the bat's face and is carried to the next flower. This is one way the saguaro cactus is pollinated.





## Rattlesnake

Rattlesnakes belong to a group of poisonous snakes known as pit vipers. These snakes have small depressions, or pits, on both sides of their faces. These pits are used as temperature detectors to help them locate prey in the dark. The rattle at the end of a rattlesnake's tail is made of dry, horny rings of skin that interlock with each other. They never shake the rattle when hunting—that would spoil the hunt. When they shake it they are announcing their presence, warning that they are dangerous, and asking to be left alone. The rattlesnake's venom, or poison, is produced in a large gland behind the eyes. When a rattlesnake bites, its fangs enter and leave the victim in less than a second. The poison is injected into the victim through both fangs. Their diet may include small warm-blooded animals such as rodents and rabbits, birds, and lizards.



### Fantastic Fact:

A rattlesnake's fangs are "folded" back into its mouth when not in use.

## Scorpions

There are more than 1,300 species of scorpions worldwide. Although some species have as many as twelve eyes, scorpions have very poor eyesight. They have sense organs on their bellies to detect chemical trails of their own species. In addition, they rely on their sense of touch to locate prey. Often, a scorpion walks around with its claws spread apart until it bumps into a tasty spider or insect. Only then does it capture its victim!



### Fantastic Fact:

A scorpion's stinger is a hollow tube connected to a poison gland near the end of its tail.

## Kit Fox

Kit foxes live throughout the desert regions of North America. Adults have a slender body, narrow skull, long nose and a long bushy tail. Their pale color makes them nearly invisible against light-colored desert sands. The soles of their feet are hairy, which helps them walk on loose sand.



They also have large ears that stand up straight in the air. When the desert breeze blows over them, it cools the blood inside. Then the blood circulates, cooling the rest of the body. They feed on rodents, squirrels, rabbits, insects and birds. When running, they can reach speeds of up to 25 miles per hour.

## Gila Monster

A Gila monster has black, orange, pink or yellow splotches and spots on its body. It also has small bead-like scales across its back. This lizard's diet consists of eggs, lizards, birds and mice. An adult Gila monster grows to 18 inches in length. It prefers to live in rocky desert areas hiding among rock ledges. It has a poisonous bite; however they are not aggressive toward humans.



### Fantastic Fact:

The Gila monster and the Mexican Beaded Lizard are the only two poisonous lizards in the world.